

1990

Christoph Hein: Der Tangospieler

Brent O. Peterson
Princeton University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Peterson, Brent O. (1990) "Christoph Hein: Der Tangospieler," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v16i2.972>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *GDR Bulletin* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

keine Kultur. Für eine solche Öffentlichkeit plädiert er in den abgedruckten Essays und in seiner Rede auf dem X. Schriftstellerkongreß der DDR im November 1987, wo er mutig und kompromißlos mit der Zensur in seinem Staat ins Gericht geht: "Die Zensur der Verlage und Bücher, der Verleger und Autoren ist überlebt, nutzlos, paradox, menschenfeindlich, volksfeindlich, ungesetzlich und strafbar" (*Die Zeit*, 4. Dez. 1987). In dieser Bemerkung richtet er ironischerweise gegen die Zensur diejenigen Argumente, deren sie sich gewöhnlich selbst bedient bei der Verweigerung der Druckgenehmigung.

Sich der Problematik seiner Zeit aktiv zu stellen, ist nach Hein die wichtigste Aufgabe des Künstlers. Wie er selbst dieser Forderung nachkommt, beweisen am besten seine Präsenz in den öffentlichen Diskussionen, wo es jeweils um die Rolle der Kultur in seinem Staate geht, und seine Werke. Im Kontext der heutigen Debatte um das Verhältnis der Intellektuellen der DDR zu den demokratischen Veränderungen in ihrem Lande bietet die vorliegende Sammlung sicherlich eine aufschlußreiche und interessante Lektüre.

Maria Król
Kent State University

Christoph Hein. *Der Tangospieler*. Frankfurt a. M.: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1989. 217 pp. [Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1989.]

The acrimonious debate over Christ Wolf's *Was bleibt* quickly spilled from feuilleton to front page because it raised questions about the moral and political responsibility of intellectuals in the GDR. My criticism of Christoph Hein's *Tangospieler*, by way of contrast, only outraged about half the audience in one session of a recent conference--but for much the same reason. In spite of the undisputed "quality" of the two works, the issue in such discussions is anything but "aesthetic." Until recently, when Wolf and Hein wrote about intellectuals, as they almost always did, their texts constituted part of an alternative public sphere; what they discussed was, in turn, discussed by others, with an openness that was otherwise rare. At the same time, the political status of their texts virtually forced both Wolf and Hein to function as political and moral instances during last fall's "November Revolution," only to disappear when their idealism and hopes for a social-democratic future became utterly unpopular. Retrospective reviews of their work are therefore necessarily about what they and the characters they created might have done differently.

The central figure in *Der Tangospieler*, Hans-Peter Dallow, is a young historian, who is innocently caught up in the jaws of the GDR's machinery of repression. The novel opens early in 1968, as Dallow is released from prison, where he has spent twenty-one months for playing the piano accompaniment to a tango whose text, unbeknown to Dallow, "den greisen Führer des Staates verspottete" (77). This "accident" is the source of all of his subsequent problems: Having been punished for a political crime, Dallow is no longer able to occupy his position as an *Oberassistent* at the university's historical institute, much less to hope for a promotion. Since GDR law required its citizens to have some form of employment, Dallow cannot simply drop out, but no one seems to be particularly interested in hiring an ex-historian to drive trucks or to wait on tables. Dallow does realize that the help he is offered, by two men who are obviously members of the Stasi, would certainly compromise him, and he is also unwilling to resume working at the institute until someone apologizes for the mistake "they" made in imprisoning him. Curiously, however, Dallow's principled refusal evaporates completely when he is offered a *Dozentur*. It seems that his old rival stumbled into the same sort of arbitrary trap as Dallow; the unfortunate fellow unwittingly parroted the party line and claimed that an invasion

of Czechoslovakia by her fellow socialist states was logically impossible, on the very morning that their troops marched in. Hein uses Dallow in part to criticize the GDR's role in the suppression of "socialism with human face," and since Dallow is incapable of reflection and completely untroubled by his rival's fate, one can easily imagine him falling again, and just as quickly, had he managed to survive until October or November of 1989.

In addition to his political obtuseness, the book is awash with Dallow's gratuitous sexism. Except when drunk or otherwise dodging responsibility, the man's sensibilities begin and end at his penis. One wonders how Hein could even imagine women submitting to this lout, and I find it inexplicable that the same writer who so convincingly portrayed the female doctor of *Der fremde Freund* shows no more interest in this book's women and their lives than does his hero. If Dallow is an innocent political victim, his punishment could easily be justified on other grounds.

It is, to sure, no accident that Dallow is an historian, and the novel is fundamentally a powerful rejection of a kind of official history that was, particularly for the Marxists of the GDR, the central legitimizing discourse in a society that was forever undergoing an identity crisis--German but not Germany. As Dallow puts it at one point:

Ich hatte mich mit Neuerer Geschichte zu befassen und unentwegt danach zu forschen, wie die illegalen sozialdemokratischen Zeitungen vor einhundert Jahren konspirativ gedruckt und über den Bodensee gerudert wurden. Und wie die tapferen Arbeiter und Handwerker der Prager Neustadt sich mit Besenstielen und Sandeimern des Bombardements von Windischgrätz erwehrten. Wenn von einer Wissenschaft nur noch Anekdoten übrigbleiben, wird es ermüdend.

Yet, in spite of his insight, Dallow is unable either to reflect on or to work through his own recent past, and the narrative of his failure, both personally and professionally, has to be regarded as typical of the whole historiographical enterprise of the GDR.

I use the term narrative here advisedly as a characterization of Hein's indictment. *Der Tangospieler* is not only a sustained attack on the profession of history; its form is that of a conventional story with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. Such narratives imply the existence of a God-like instance whose power is external (extradiegetic) and timeless, but whose perspective is necessary as an organizing principle, and, as Hayden White argues, narrated coherence is inevitably a moral judgment about the "real" or imaginary figures and events that have been selected and ordered. In essence, the form of *Der Tangospieler* is an enabling condition for the reasoned critique that Hein launches against the practice of historical scholarship in the GDR.

At the level of form *Der Tangospieler* differs markedly from Hein's previous novel, *Horns Ende*, even though both novels are historical. In contrast to *Der Tangospieler*'s linearity *Horns Ende* is a multi-dimensional jigsaw puzzle that refuses to impose a single, coherent narration on the numerous partial stories it contains. Although it deals with the persecution of gypsies and the mentally ill, i.e., with events that are universally condemned, *Horns Ende* refuses *Der Tangospieler*'s moralizing certainty to advance what seems to me to be a far more damning critique of GDR historiography. By denying the possibility of any single, unambiguous narrative, and by refusing the moral instance of a narrator, in effect, by entrusting narration to its readers, *Horns Ende* makes a gesture that is far more democratic and far more empowering than any narrativized condemnation can ever be. The lesson of *Der Tangospieler* might well be that a writer as gifted as Christoph Hein should not pick such easy targets. By claiming the moral high ground he produced a novel that seems to me to fail on every level. It fails to arouse our sympathy for the historian Dallow, who was unjustly prosecuted for a minor political offense, because the novel needs the same character to represent the evil of the compromised intellectual. Should someone actually identify with this

justly, unjustly mistreated sexist, the result would be to make Dal- low too ambiguous for the negative role he has to play as an historian. Ultimately, however, it is the claim of a single fictional truth that undoes the whole project; no truth, not even the sad history of the GDR's suppression of human rights at home and abroad is ever quite as one-sided as Hein represents it here. Now that the Wall has been irrevocably toppled, one would hope that Hein, Wolf, and the host of other talented writers who are or were GDR authors would regain their lost moral and political relevance by writing the kind of probing, nuanced, and infinitely discussable accounts that this reader of *Der Tangospieler* had hoped for.

Brent O. Peterson
Princeton University

Honnef, Theo. *Heinrich von Kleist in der Literatur der DDR*. DDR-Studien/East German Studies, 4. Bern, Frankfurt: Lang, 1988. 252 S.

Wirft man heute aus der Distanz des Herbstes 1989 einen Blick zurück auf die noch vor kurzem so heiß diskutierten Phänomene wie die Romantikrezeption oder eben die Aufnahme Heinrich von Kleists in der DDR, so kommt man kaum darum herum, die kleinkarierte Provinzialität dieser intellektuellen Kämpfe zu erkennen. Dieser historische Umschlag beeinträchtigt auch die Lektüre von Theo Honnefs detailreich und präzise dargestellter Geschichte der wissenschaftlichen, kultur-bürokratischen und literarischen Rezeption von und Auseinandersetzung mit Kleists Leben und Werk in der DDR. Honnef konnte zum Zeitpunkt der Niederschrift noch auf aktuelle Relevanz seines Themas hoffen, für den Leser kann das vorgestellte Material nur mehr von historischem Interesse sein.

Das weitgehend deskriptive Buch stellt im ersten Teil die Entwicklung des offiziellen Kleistbildes in der DDR dar. Interessant sind hier vor allem die Wandlungen in der DDR-Germanistik, der Verweis auf die Leistungen von Deiters, Fischer, Mayer, Streller u. a. bis zu Leistner, die inmitten einer possenartigen Kulturpolitik dennoch ein aktuelles Kleistbild vorbereiteten, das schließlich auch die widerständigen Momente von Leben und Werk, die diesen Dichter den offiziellen Erbeverwaltern schon immer verdächtig gemacht hatten, zur Geltung brachte. Eben diese Momente von Opposition, Entfremdung, Verstörtheit und ästhetischer Innovation waren es, die zahlreiche Autoren der DDR zur literarischen und bisweilen auch zur essayistischen Reaktion reizten. Die Gründe liegen auf der Hand, und Honnef hat ihnen nichts wesentlich Neues hinzuzufügen: Der soziale Außenseiter und ästhetische Nonkonformist einer anderen Epoche gescheiterter Hoffnungen bot eine historische Schablone für die eigene Befindlichkeit und hatte zudem eine literarische Norm gesetzt, an der sich abzuarbeiten nur Gewinn bringen konnte.

Im 2. und Hauptteil des Buches verfolgt Honnef den Wandel der literarischen Kleistrezeption anhand ausgewählter Beispiele mit viel Detailfreude. Er beginnt mit weitgehend vergessenen Texten von Dora Wentscher, Jutta Hecker, Bodo Uhse und Helmut Heinrich, und er endet bei Kunert, Müller und Wolf. Daneben gibt es noch ein Kapitel zum langjährigen Streit um den Band *Schriftsteller über Kleist* (Kunert gegen Goldammer) und ein Kapitel zu kleineren Arbeiten (vor allem Lyrik). Am sympathischsten ist Honnef offensichtlich das Kleistbild Christa Wolfs, die in ihren Essays und literarischen Texten die Gründe für Kleists Lebensproblematik in seiner Sensibilität für die Krise der Aufklärung, der Folgenlosigkeit der Französischen Revolution, gesellschaftlicher Entfremdung und letztlich in patriarchalischen Strukturen der abendländischen Zivilisation findet. Es ist in dem Zusammenhang übrigens interessant, wie nah Wolfs Kleist aus *Kein Ort. Nirgends* dem germanistischen Kleistbild der 70er und 80er Jahre steht.

Honnefs Auswahl der Werke und Autoren sowie die Kapitelabfolge bleiben relativ beliebig, worin sich eine Schwäche des Bandes andeutet, die sich im Schlußkapitel bestätigt. So interessant und kompetent dargestellt Honnefs Beobachtungen im einzelnen auch sind (bes. in den Kapiteln zu Kunert und Wolf), das Buch hätte von interpretativen Thesen profitieren können, die über das unmittelbar Belegbare und vom Leser ohnehin Vermutete hinausgehen. Aus der interpretativen Zurückhaltung mag sich auch die Merkwürdigkeit erklären, daß Honnef erst zu Beginn seines Schlußkapitels, "Zusammenfassung und Ausblick," einen Forschungsbericht seines Themas bietet, der zum Teil ganz neue Fragestellungen aufwirft. Der Ausblick läuft auf kurze Darstellungen der Rezeption anderer umstrittener Autoren (von Hölderlin bis Hoffmann) sowie auf eine knappe und darum unbefriedigend bleibende Diskussion der DDR-spezifischen Klassikerlegende hinaus. Trotz dieser Kritikpunkte bleibt festzuhalten, daß Honnefs Beobachtungen auch nach dem Herbst 1989 noch von Bedeutung sind sowohl für die rezeptions orientierte Kleistforschung als auch für die Literaturgeschichtsschreibung der DDR.

Bernd Fischer
Ohio State University

Heym, Stefan. *5 Tage im Juni*. Roman. Berlin: Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1989. 404 pp.

Fifteen years after its publication in the West and about thirty-five years after the writing of its first version (*Der Tag X*), Stefan Heym's *5 Tage im Juni* finally appeared in the GDR in late 1989. Heym's autobiography, *Nachruf*, and his *Schwarzenberg* have also been scheduled to be published there. The publication of these three books is a major step toward making formerly unobtainable works of this important GDR author available to his compatriots and thus joins the current wave of printings of GDR works which could not be published in the GDR until now.

Although Western readers are already familiar with the content of *5 Tage im Juni*, the work is new to GDR readers, whose interest in the events it describes has only been heightened by the political and social upheaval since Fall 1989. Heym sets his novel in East Berlin from June 13 through 17, 1953, with a brief "Nachspiel" on June 14, 1954. By combining his novellistic plot and fictional characters with documentary excerpts from actual reports, Party meetings, speeches, Western broadcasts, and the like, as well as with his knowledge gained by firsthand experience and research, he succeeds in portraying his version of the 1953 uprising and the events surrounding it, an account which differs significantly from the long-time official GDR view.

Heym focuses on the workers of VEB Merkur and their involvement in the June events. His protagonist, Martin Witte, the plant's union leader and loyal communist, opposes the Party decision to raise the norms by 10%, recognizes and tries to defuse the growing unrest among the workers because of it, struggles in vain to alert the Party to the danger of strike and the need for consultation with the workers, and finally acts on his own initiative to defend the plant when the strike occurs and to bring back the striking Merkur workers. Despite his good advice, accurate predictions, and his efforts to ameliorate the situation, he is ultimately relieved of his position and sent to Party school to learn to subjugate his views to those of the Party.

Although he sees the raising of the norms and the accumulated dissatisfactions of the workers as underlying factors, Heym clearly identifies two major causes of the uprising. The machinations of two Western agents (Quelle and Hofer) and their Merkur collaborators (Gadebusch and Kallmann), the acts of many lesser GDR dissidents and Western thugs, and documentary comments from Western radio all reflect the official GDR view that the uprising resulted from a Western conspiracy intended to topple the